



Beyond Contemporary Discourse: Locating Deep Ecological Spirituality

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Abstract : Most of the modern man’s ills are the results of what the Greeks called ‘Hubris’ - a kind of pride. It drives men both as a race and as individuals to regard themselves as outside of and superior to the natural world. As a result of this ego-centric ethos, in consequence of intelligence and technology, so much is wrong with the man’s relation to the non-human cosmos. This modern crisis of consciousness or what D.H.Lawrence describes as arrogant “mental consciousness” or “deembodied ego” has set in motion the long range of misdirection which has in a way resulted in the disaster of modern life (qtd. in Underhill, 1). Today we all are acting as criminals against Nature in our blind pursuit of a utopian Brave New World. But the human intellect attempting to have an abstract domain for itself, in opposition to nature and body, has its own consequences which are nothing less than catastrophic in terms of our survival on the face of this fragile Earth whose life support systems are close to breakdown? Thinkers are also at pains to see the finest characteristics of their culture and heritage being devastated by the socio-economic transformation which has followed technological progress. As such it becomes the ethical responsibility of all the imaginative writers and thinkers to reestablish vital connection between our present culture and ecological predicament, as a species who have lost the sense of the sane and sacred – both inside and outside, and who, as a result, may be close to committing suicide.

There was a person  
Could not get rid of his mother  
As if he were her topmost twig  
So he pounded and hacked at her  
With numbers and equations and laws  
Which he invented and called truth. . . .  
With all her babes in her arms, in ghostly  
weeping, She died.  
His head fell like a leaf. (Ted Hughes’s  
Crow, 244-245)

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro marks a definitive shift in the entire ecological discourse. While underlining the misdirection of the entire human evolutionary march which caused and precipitated this ecological ‘problematique’, the summit went on to propose a new way of seeing the reality. This new way was creatively phrased on the basis of the new political strategy of ‘sustainable development’ delineated in the 1987 United Nations’ Brundtland Commission report *Our Common Future*. However the conceptual basis of this

‘generative metaphor’ on which the entire environmental discourse is presently founded, was fallacious from its very inception. Essentially the concept means that ‘we can have it all’, both further growth and a cleaner environment. It means nothing more than a kind of “eco-managerialism” or “ecological modernization” which serves as a suitable vehicle for the continuation of the same techno-industrial arrangement and socio-cultural relationship, which is, in fact, the primary cause of the ecological crisis (Hajer and Fischer, 2). After all, the present ecological crisis is the unintended consequence of some of capitalism’s essential features such as the continued reliance on economic growth and its insatiable desire to create new markets through political interventions. Behind this we see various key practices of modernity working to further this political-economic dynamic: the dominance of scientific rationality and

expert knowledge, the strong belief in technological innovations as the agents of progress, the implicit legitimization of the use of violence and the tendency to see nature as an exploitable resource or as an externality. Thus the entire conceptual framework has no intentions of interrogating the consumerized culture of greed unleashed by the western forces of 'capitalistic globalization'. The problem is also compounded by the fact that today the neo-liberal policies of globalization and commercialization have assumed the dimension of a 'grand narrative' which refuses to share any space with any kind of alternative vision or philosophy. Instead of upholding and celebrating the post-modern philosophic concepts of 'difference' and diversity, the reality of the modern globalized world, founded on the principles of western secular ethos, negates and subverts all kinds of meta-narratives, myths and beliefs which could have ensured a better socio-natural relationships. This anthropocentric ideology leaves no space for the ecology of languages; the diversity of species; the existence of community living based on its own belief-patterns; the sovereignty of nations and cultures; and so on and so forth. This all hinders, in a way, the emergence of more temporarily and spatially focused attempts to reconstruct institutional routines and socio-natural relationships.

Lost to this approach is the 'deeper cultural critique' of the contemporary society and its notion of growth and progress. It is in fact ironic that the environment discourse in the first place emerged in large parts as a cultural critique of the modern society and its ways. In one of the first documents *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson argues for a return to a more biologically-grounded appreciation of nature and its cycles of decline and renewal as against the idea of exploiting nature by such means as the use of pesticides, herbicides and other toxic chemicals for growth. While foregrounding the fact that nature as a cultural construct was at stake, the book presented a poignant critique of a particular way of relating to nature and

implicated the entire social order in environmental politics. The cultural aspect as an integral part of ecological discourse was also reintroduced in the works of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky later. *Cultural critique* as a theory refers to the various practices and utterances within environmental discourse that problematize existing arrangements and suggest alternative ways of living harmoniously with nature. The resonance generated by *Silent Spring*, for example, was not merely related to the use of pesticides but pointed to a general unease with the "effluence of affluence" (Hajer and Fischer, 7). From the dropping of the atom bombs and Chernobyl disaster to the oil spillage and industrial contamination – everything as a consequence of a certain cultural ordering or preferred social arrangements has to be an essential part of any viable ecological debate.

To find an authentic ecological discourse, we have to move beyond the dominant global techno-managerial mode and seek to uncover possibilities for alternative trajectories with strong cultural-political underpinnings. There is an urgent need to traverse the whole historical heritage of mankind and open a 'dialogic discourse' to look at various sources of wisdom contained in different philosophies, cultures, traditions and myths. Man needs to regain the capacity of 'listening to' and 'listening from' nature and other human beings. To rediscover better modes of social organization and deeper realm of values and beliefs that allow man to survive with nature, we have to locate how different cultures and traditions have constructed different meanings and purposes for nature. My main argument in this paper is that the spiritual traditions and philosophy of Hinduism will be more appropriate to meet the environmental challenges of the twenty first century. Leaving aside the swords and guns, computers and microscopes, cars and televisions, the world must revisit the ecological philosophy of Hinduism to rediscover the lost balance and elusive harmony. By acquiring a new '*sanatan* consciousness'

one will find spirituality pervading the whole universe, and then, everything – rivers, mountains, forests, animals, men and women - will look sane and sacred, reflecting the same cosmic consciousness in every corner and crevice of existence.

If one looks at the entire anthropological discourse in its historicity, one will find that the definition of man varies according to the way his relationship with nature is visualized as much as the definition of nature varies according to the way the human element is conceived. In the orthodox school of Indian philosophy one rarely finds a word which points out man in both the aspects; as one who belongs to as well as who transcends the definition of nature. “Man” as a person is believed to be one of the many creatures of nature. This perspective was also common in ancient Western traditions till at least the Renaissance and the advent of an anthropocentric attitude in Europe which revolutionized the previous ecocentric viewpoint and which is now rightly characterized as ‘Copernican revolution’. Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature*, a key text in eco-critical history, ascribes to Bacon a pivotal role in the emergence of an environmentally destructive world view where “the image of an organic cosmos with a living female earth at its centre gave way to a mechanistic world view in which nature was constituted as dead and passive, to be dominated and controlled by humans” (16). This anthropocentrism, by centering the event of knowledge in the human person was also responsible for redefining nature as the objective side of such an event. However there are some who also hold Judaeo-Christian traditions responsible for this shift in the form of the emergence of anthropocentrism. This biblical passage has often been cited to justify a dualistic interpretation of existence in terms of isolating man from the rest of nature and bestowing upon him a higher status, which has further been used to justify human beings’ right to dominate and exploit the nature:

And God said; Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them

have domination over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, over the cattle, and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (Genesis 1: 26)

In the Oriental religions this kind of anthropocentric revolution never took place and philosophies therefore remained mainly concerned in seeing spirit – and not the human being – as the ontological counterpart of nature. The ancient philosophy of Hinduism which is, in fact, a way of life, offers much to ponder concerning the spiritual and metaphysical connections between humans and nature. In the *Vedas* one can discover one of the most fascinating adventures of human spirit aimed at integrating man with the natural milieu upon which his survival is dependent. It is a human voyage from the desire of understanding the order of exterior nature up to the desire of realizing the nature of man’s own inner self which is in fact an expression of the entire realm of nature. The hymns in the *Veda* constitute the effective media by which early Aryan man expresses his intimate emotions at the perception of the mystery of himself and nature. Here the archaic child of nature declares his love for what creation gives and recognizes his own position as receiver and dependent on the gifts of nature. It is the recognition of this relation that ultimately resulted in the creation of a religious culture. Once this religious perspective was established in Vedic society, intellectual speculations proceeded further to the principles which give unity to the whole of existence.

In search for the “origins” ancient myths generally propounded a design of an evolutionary universe which proceeded from an “original source”. Instead of conceiving the causes of phenomena as temporary or arbitrary, as the modern physics does, the Vedic poets conceived them as eternal entities which rule all temporary phenomena. They searched for the “roots of nature, for the genesis of its forms, and for the makers of its rules” (Santis, 24). They conceived all creation to be subject to a eternal cosmic law, “*ṛta*” and the gods as the mere custodians of this law, not its creators. *Rta* is then

eternally constant, unmodified by any agency; ruling and harmonizing all levels of existence. The entire Vedic poetry is a song giving expression to this composed harmony which moves the nature.

Eternal Law (*ṛta*) hath varied food that Strengthens; thought of eternal law remove transgressions. . . .

To law belongs the vast earth and heavens: Milch-kine supreme, to law they milk they render.

(Rig Veda, 4, 23,9-10 [4], Trans. By R.T.H.Griffith)

The entire Vedic poetry is a vision of an animated reality, a disclosure of the essence of the things, a penetration into the intimate and most secret layers of nature, where each event has a soul. Gods, wherever they are invoked or mentioned, are simply the “symbolic manifestations” of a higher, unmanifested, impersonal reality or transcendental nature. A name used to refer to such a word, capable to awaken the secret forces of nature is “*brahman*” or “spirit” from which life proceeds, which permeates each and every living being, but also transcends them all.

Of whom earth is model and

Atmosphere belly; who made the sky his head- to that chief *Brahman* be homage.

Of whom the sun is eye, and the moon that Grows new again; who made Agni his mouth- To that chief *Brahman* be homage.

Who born from toil, from penance, completely

Attained all worlds; who made soma all his own- To that chief *Brahman* be homage. (A. V. 10, 7, 32-36 [13]) trans. By W.D.Whitney

The last portion of the *Veda*, the *Upanishads*, moved even further from the worship of the powers of nature to the realization of the essence of existence; from the cult of life to the cult of spirit. The seers of the *Upanishads* became less interested in singing about the splendid forms of life and moved inward into the self of man since the external world is the same one that gives order to the inner psychic world of man. The mystery of nature is in fact the mystery of his own self, of his “*atman*”. In this poetic vision “*Brahman*” is regarded as the soul of nature and “*atman*” is the inner nature of

man. But in the magic of Vedic poetry everything is integrated. The great sayings of Upanishads are expressive of this unity: “*Aham Brahman Asmi*”. “*Atman and Brahman are one*”. “*Brahman is all and all is in Brahman*”. “I am that.” “You are that”. “All is that”.

This is how, from the wonder of the poet looking at the mystery of nature at the beginning of the *Veda*, we arrive at the wonder of realizing the unity of existence in the *Upanishads*. Upanishads proceed from metaphors and poetic imagery, trying gradually to approach this core of existence, *Brahman*, but still the answer is a secret as no language is capable of defining its absoluteness. The closest metaphor used is a negative symbolism and *Brahman* is described as the “unmanifested”, “ineffable”, “untransformed”, “not here-in-the-nature”, and “not-alien-from-nature”: the *neti-neti* of the *Upanishad* poets. What is affirmed with conviction is the idea that realization of *Brahman* is the realization of one’s own inner nature. This is how the Vedic poets conceive of and achieve cosmic unity. They ultimately open up the frames of human identity for including one’s own self in a transcendental oneness with the soul of the universe.

Thus in Hinduism “spirituality pervades and infuses all forms of existence – human, animate and inanimate” (Frost and Egri 1990, 7). It informs the view that all that exists in nature is living and sacred therefore deserving of respect and care. All the spiritual traditions or myths underline three basic assumptions; (1) the existence of numerous coexisting and interpenetrating worlds of experience; (2) the need for holistic balance amongst these worlds; and (3) that change is a continuous transformational process. To ignore or deny the spiritual, cultural, emotional and physical interconnections between humans and the rest of the creation is not only disrespectful but also destructive. Hindus, through various myths and rituals, celebrate the cycles of regeneration, diversity within unity, and human’s essential connectedness with nature; with a belief that everyone and everything in nature has inherent value

and meaning. It is these ethical and philosophical principles which form the basic structure on which the ideas of man, nature and their relationships are conceived in Hinduism, and it is these principles which form the core of not only the beliefs but as a way of life in the broader cultural sense.

The *Isa Upanishad* tells us that everything, from blade of grass to whole cosmos, is the home of God. God or *Brahman* lives in every corner of existence. This is also the famous message Lord Krishna gives to humanity in the *Bhagwad Gita*: “I am the seed of all existence. There is no being, moving or still, that exists without Me” (10. 39). Therefore the whole creation is sacred. Ma Ganga is the symbol of that spirit which permeates through every river. Kailash Pravat is the holy mountain, but all mountains are holy because God lives there. Ma Cow is holy because ultimately all animal kingdom is holy. Peepal tree and Tulsi plant are sacred because all trees and plants share the same holy spirit. This sense of sacred in the whole of creation is fundamental to the Hindus’ relationship with nature. As compared to the Western civilization which considers human life to be sacred, Hindus have gone much further and believes that all existence- animate or inanimate- is sacred and thus must be revered and respected.

Hindu tradition gives us three principles: *Yajna*, *daan* and *tapas* – sacrifice, sharing and self-restraint. These are the three ecological principles for the replenishment of earth. *Yajna* is a beautiful ritual which symbolizes that every activity – whatever is most precious to you – should be sacrificed for God, for nature, for the poor and for future generations. *Daan* or sharing symbolizes the Hindu concept for egalitarian economy and the replenishment of society. Instead of reducing people to being just the consumers, Hindus uphold the principle of giving it back to the world in terms of money, labour, intelligence, time – whatever you have. In fact all this principle advocates ‘the culture of need’ in place of ‘the culture of greed’. This maintains the ecology of the society by

freeing it from poverty, exploitation, deprivation, and hunger. And finally with the help of *tapas*, self-control, Hindus replenish their soul –the internal spiritual environment. This is how Hindus conceive of creating an integrated and harmonious society based on healthy relationship with the three environments: the natural environment, the social environment, and the inner environment. This is how they try to cultivate a higher ecocentric consciousness by shedding the anthropocentric one. This is what is probably meant by “Om shanty, shanty, shanty” with which every prayer ends. The famous poet T. S. Eliot also suggests the same path to the Western Waste landers, the path shown by Lord Prajapati with the three pronouncements of Da’s – Daya, Daan and Daman.

The deep ecology of Hinduism has codified environmentally beneficial practices in its rituals, proverb and stories. For example, respect and even reverence for other species is based on religious concept of *Reincarnation* that the Supreme Being is incarnated in various species and that humans themselves can be reincarnated as animals and birds. Rather than limiting oneself to abstract ideas of reality, it advocates the ‘yogic meditations’ to re-sensitize oneself to see, hear, and feel the oneness of life which is a “mutually causal web of relationship as in the jewel image of the Jewel Net of Indra” (Kaza, 57). Thus in Hinduism violence to other beings within the biotic community is immoral and given the percept of interdependence, self-destructive. Hindu doctrine of *Karma Yoga* also teaches the highest ideal of moral actions by emphasizing the importance of taking responsibility for every action in all of one’s relationships. Hinduism also underlines the fact that there is an intricate web of cyclic relationship within and between the spiritual and material realms, the human and the non-human environment. It informs the view that the environment is a perfect mirror of man and if humans abuse or misuse the natural environment, then the environment responds in a harmful way. This is how Hinduism

intends to maintain and restore the harmony and balance between man and nature through subjective and objective understanding as well as self transformation in all aspects of human existence – spiritual, intellectual, social and material. Ideally every Hindu is supposed to practice these environmental-friendly tenets and principles in the form of ritualistic practices so as to constantly remind himself about the sacred bond between the material and spiritual realms, between his own self and the rest of the existence.

Since there is an urgent need for fundamental changes in the ecological consciousness of humanity, the modern societies must find a new story, a new sense of the universe, to take mankind into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Matthew Fox has summed it up quite aptly: “Mother Earth is in jeopardy, caused by the anthropocentrism of religion, education and science during the past three centuries. A new beginning is required centred on the sacredness of the planet” (50). In that sense, Hinduism, as a way of life, can be an exploration and earnest attempt about ‘being’ as well ‘doing’. The humanity needs to take a leaf out of the spiritual values and beliefs of Hinduism in recapturing connections with the natural environment so as to make peace with the planet which humankind has abused. To the degree that these spiritual traditions influence social norms and behavior, they can provide much needed inspiration and personal commitment so necessary for ecological self-discipline and activism. Let us all give a serious thought to what the famous post-modern ecocritic, Thomas Berry, has to say:

The universe itself, but especially the planet Earth, needs to be experienced as the primary mode of divine presence, just as it is the primary educator, primary healer, primary commercial establishment, and primary lawgiver for all that exists within this life community. The basic spirituality communicated by the natural world can also be considered as normative for the future ecological age. (Berry, 120)

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